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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000704

SIPDIS

STATE DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS OFFICIALS IN TAJIKISTAN: WHO'S RUNNING THE SHOW?

REF: 09 DUSHANBE 347

CLASSIFIED BY: Tracey Jacobson, Ambassador, EXEC, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Catherine Cosman, Senior Analyst at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), met with Tajik officials June 1-4 to discuss the country's religious policy. USCIRF has placed Tajikistan on a list of countries of concern because of government restrictions on religious expression, embodied in a newly enacted religion law (reftel). Government officials stuck to their talking points, insisting that regulation -- as opposed to restriction -- was necessary, and that any criticism of the government's religious policy was unwarranted. More interestingly, we believe we have finally met one of the main architects of the government's religious policy.
End summary.

TOEING THE LINE

¶2. (SBU) During her June 1-4 visit to Dushanbe, Catherine Cosman met with Saidmurod Fattoev, State Advisor on Social and Political Issues, Mirzoshohruxh Asrori, the Minister of Culture, and Murodullo Davlatov, the Head of the Islamic Center under President Rahmon's Executive Office. Asrori claimed that introducing the religion law was one of his ministry's most important achievements, and he recited the usual talking points in defense of it: government officials drafted the law in conjunction with civil society and international organizations; criticism of the law is based on inaccurate information, or is an attempt to "politicize" religious issues; the law respects the separation of government and religious issues. Fattoev and Davlatov made almost identical arguments.

¶3. (SBU) Asrori made a distinction between regulation and restriction. It is necessary for the government to regulate religious issues -- while not interfering in them -- in order to ensure that all rights are protected. The provisions relating to government registration of religious organizations, population quotas for mosques, and government supervision of selecting imams are not restrictions; they are simply "necessary because of our mentality."

14. (C) Davlatov was the most forthright in his characterization of the government's religious policy. He had previously served as the Deputy Minister of Culture, and he is rumored to be an intelligence official. His office was created a few months ago with the mandate to "research religious trends." It now has 35 employees, and ours was his first meeting with international officials as the Head of the Islamic Center.

15. (C) Davlatov initially claimed to have nothing to do with the new religion law, after which he spent more than an hour enumerating the reasons why the law was necessary. Extremism is a serious threat to the government and society, and there are radical imams who can misinform the public. The law is a prophylactic, giving the government the ability to preserve stability and security. The law does create some conflicts with religious practice -- but should the government allow Islam to promote polygamy, for example?

16. (C) Comment: Davlatov knows Arabic, and he occasionally quoted passages from the Quran. He appeared to have a relatively deep understanding of religious practice, which differentiates him from most officials here involved in religious affairs. His initial exchanges with Cosman were somewhat hostile, particularly when he was asked about controversial provisions of the law. By the end of the meeting, however, he had calmed down significantly, and he said he was open to cooperation in the future.

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WHO'S REALLY IN CHARGE HERE?

17. (C) It was clear from our meetings that Davlatov is a major force behind the government's religious policy. From his tone and arguments, it is very likely that he was one of the main drafters of the religion law, and he has an important role in shaping the government's perception of, and relationship to, religious communities. He spoke like a Soviet security apparatchik rather than an academic who is merely "studying trends" in Islam. Fattoev and Asrori are obviously used to speaking to international audiences, but they likely have little influence in formulating policy.

End comment.
JACOBSON